

# THE OPERATIONAL TRILOGY

by

JOHN F. MEEHAN III

With the 1982 revision of the Army's basic manual on doctrine, Field Manual 100-5, a new term officially entered the Army's lexicon. The official recognition that there was such a thing as the "operational level" of war was long overdue, but the appearance of this "new" term in conjunction with the promulgation of a new doctrine—AirLand Battle—quite naturally led to a presumption that the two concepts were related. They are not. AirLand Battle is a tactical doctrine, a doctrine essentially oriented on how to fight.<sup>1</sup> The operational level of war is, by definition, above tactics. The operational level of war links tactical activities to strategic goals. It defines what is to be accomplished, not how to do it. To a large degree the 1982 revision of FM 100-5, with its new concepts, was a sign that the Army finally was coming to grips with the lessons of Vietnam. That these new lessons are simply restatements of the old is a fact that still has not been fully accepted.

The failure to define clearly the term "operational level" has caused confusion, and to date much of the discussion on the topic has centered on the search for an exact definition. As initially defined in FM 100-5, the operational level of war was the use of available military forces to attain strategic goals within a theater of war. Unfortunately, the manual then went on to say, "Most simply, it is the theory of larger unit operations."<sup>2</sup> That the two statements are contradictory did not seem important as long as the definition of the operational level had the same meaning as the term "operational art" used by the Soviets, who have devoted considerable intellectual capital to developing the concept, and who possess an army well

experienced at the operational level. It has become apparent, however, that Soviet doctrinal concepts cannot be grafted directly onto the American version. The Soviet concept of operational art simply is not synonymous with the operational level of war which is now part of US Army doctrine. As it has evolved, the American use of the term "operational level of war" is considerably different from the Soviet model. As the 1986 version of FM 100-5 recognizes, the operational level of war is not tied to force size but to the objectives which are sought.<sup>3</sup> If military force is committed to achieve a strategic objective, then the military activities which follow are at the operational level.

## STRATEGIES

While the operational trilogy—the hierarchical flow of conceptual thought from the strategic to the operational to the tactical levels of war—seems clear enough, the actual relationships are complex. The process begins with the identification of national objectives and the selection of a national strategy that will accomplish those objectives. This national strategy will employ all four elements of power—political, economic, psychological, and military—and the employment of each of these elements of power requires the same conceptual clarity as the use of the military element.<sup>4</sup>

Within the military strategy component of the national strategy, strategic military objectives are identified. These objectives are assigned to the appropriate military commander, normally a theater commander, who must then develop a theater military strategy that will achieve the strategic objectives

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>1986</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-1986 to 00-00-1986</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>The Operational Trilogy</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>U.S. Army War College,ATTN: Parameters ,122 Forbes Avenue ,Carlisle,PA,17013-5238</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>10</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

assigned to him. He will pick operational-level objectives that will enable him to execute his strategy and define the operational concepts which he feels are most appropriate. Finally, he will determine the military resources needed. In a world of unconstrained resources there would be only a low possibility of failure. In reality, the commander almost certainly will not have all the resources he desires. If he cannot achieve his operational objectives with the resources given, he has only three basic choices—obtain more resources, accept an increased risk of failure, or revise his operational concepts. If he chooses to revise his operational concepts, care must be taken to ensure that they continue to support the theater strategy. If not, changes up to and including a revision of national objectives may be required. Unfortunately, the standard response when faced with resource scarcity is to make no changes, but to accept an increased level of risk. In peacetime, in the absence of more serious consequences, this is the easiest of the three choices. It is also the most dangerous.

Upon examining the three levels of war, most officers will feel fairly comfortable with their understanding of the strategic level. Throughout the US system of service schools, officers have been taught that the four elements of national power must be used in combination to achieve national objectives. Theoretically, all are on firm ground in such an understanding. If asked to state the strategy of the United States, however, many officers would give vague answers, and perhaps most would maintain that there is no clearly defined national strategy, except that of expediency. If further pressed, they might define our strategy as deterrence, or containment, or—if thinking in nuclear terms—Mutual Assured Destruction. All of these answers are incorrect. Deterrence and containment are objectives, not strategies, and MAD is nothing more than a concept to help achieve the objective of deterrence in one clearly defined aspect, the nuclear.

National objectives determine the national strategy. As trite as it may sound, America's national objectives are incorporated in Michael Novak's phrase "democratic

capitalism."<sup>5</sup> His concept of democratic capitalism as an ideology includes and articulates such broad national objectives as peace, security, human rights, and related concepts which are often dismissed as platitudes. Because they are the core beliefs of our society, it is taken for granted that these objectives would be best met in a free, capitalist, democratic world. It is from national objectives such as these that the national strategy is derived. These ideological objectives require a global orientation.

The real but unstated strategy of the United States to achieve these objectives is to use the four elements of power in such a manner that, in the aggregate, the Soviet Union remains, or perceives itself to be, weaker than the United States. The Soviets represent the most significant impediment to the long-term development of a free, democratic world. If they are militarily stronger at the strategic level, we can compensate for that by our overwhelming economic might or, to a lesser extent, by the other two elements of power.

In the military arena, the national military strategy is to construct and position military forces in such a manner as to preclude war while simultaneously containing Soviet imperialism. If Soviet military power can be neutralized, then it is assumed that the other three elements of power, based on the inherent strengths of the American system, will ultimately lead to the accomplishment of

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the national objectives. Depending on the circumstances, the military objective is either military containment or deterrence. For the central nuclear forces, the objective is primarily deterrence, while in the conventional arena it is primarily containment. The decision to build the Peacemaker ICBM (MX) is a decision in support of the national military strategy, as is the decision on how many forces should be deployed in Europe, or in El Salvador. In essence, the US Fifth Corps in Germany and the training team in El Salvador both have the same mission—to curtail the expansion of Soviet power. The US conventional military strategy, by definition, is a global strategy—if the Soviet Union is not contained, then ultimately the United States will stand alone and lose. In this sense El Salvador may be considered as important as the Federal Republic of Germany. The difference is that the loss of Germany would have immediate consequences and probably could not be reversed. A roll-back of communist expansion on the fringes is always possible.

At the theater level, the United States employs all elements of power to achieve the national objective but the choice of operational concepts must be tailored to the specific theater objectives. The basic military strategy of constructing and positioning forces in order to deter war, while containing Soviet power, must be reflected in these concepts. Deterrence is the preferred objective: only when deterrence fails is it necessary to contain by the *use* of military force.

The objectives to be obtained in a theater reflect a willingness to use force that is inverse to the importance of the theater itself. For the defense of the continental United States, the core area the loss of which cannot be accepted, the objective is that of deterrence by the threat of punishment with minimal attention devoted to warfighting issues. Here the failure of deterrence is synonymous with the failure to achieve the national objective. The operational concept in the core area is Mutual Assured Destruction. At the next level of importance, the vital areas, the emphasis remains on deterrence by

punishment, but warfighting considerations are now more visible as deterrence by a denial of victory is included as a conceivable response in the interest of containment. The NATO strategy of Flexible Response reflects both types of deterrence and therefore includes a mix of operational concepts: forward defense, continuous defense, forward deployment, strategic mobility, and graduated escalation. These concepts support both types of deterrence. At the next level, in critical areas such as Korea, the objective of deterrence by punishment has virtually disappeared, and is replaced by the objective of deterrence by denial of victory—a warfighting approach. Many of the operational concepts remain the same. Finally, in areas still lower in importance such as El Salvador—South Vietnam offered another good example—the objective remains deterrence, but, in the absence of means to achieve this objective, containment often must be accomplished by the use of conventional forces. The operational concepts remain the same but at this level the concepts of FM 100-20, the Internal Defense and Development concepts, play a key role.

The importance of a theater can change over time and its objectives and operational concepts will also evolve. In the mid-1970s, at the height of the oil crisis, Iranian oil was considered essential to the United States and our initial planning stressed the use of nuclear weapons in a deterrence-by-punishment and deterrence-by-denial strategy. Iran was viewed as a vital area with virtually the same importance as Europe, and therefore a similar strategy was appropriate. Conventional force was to be used reluctantly, and only in the event deterrence of Soviet aggression failed. As the situation evolved, with the hostility of the new regime and the decreasing need for oil, the theater no longer was vital but was viewed as a critical area, with the level of sensitivity of Korea rather than Europe, and the military strategy for the theater has changed accordingly. Deterrence by punishment is the preferred solution, but the emphasis is now deterrence by the denial of victory, a warfighting approach in the Middle East.

A fundamental restriction on the execution of this national strategy is the existence of a basic structural weakness, one found in all democracies but accentuated in ours. The four elements of power in our system are poorly coordinated, and in fact all may not be consciously used. As a result, we expect one of the four elements, the military, to achieve the desired results with minimal assistance from the political, economic, and psychological elements. The military element is not only the most visible of the four, but arguably the simplest to use. We lack the recognition that even in peacetime a nation must have a national strategy that fully employs all the assets of the state. When actual conflict breaks out and a democracy mobilizes its assets, the task becomes easier; Clausewitz tells us that "as policy dissolves into enmity war becomes simpler."<sup>6</sup> In peacetime, however, the maintenance of a coherent national strategy that employs all the elements of power is the most difficult task our society faces.

A brief look at the low end of the operational trilogy, the tactical level, also reveals some basic conceptual problems. As is true at the other levels of war, all four elements of power are operative at the tactical level. At this level the military element is clearly predominant, however, and for this reason we tend to feel most comfortable with our understanding of things tactical. We are aware that the other elements of power have a role at the tactical level, but we tend to discount them. In Vietnam, the practice of body counts was a reflection of the political element of power at the tactical level, and the Chieu Hoi program for rehabilitating captured or disaffected VC was both political and psychological. We are aware of the existence of factors such as these at the tactical level, and of course at the other levels, but particularly in tactical activity we tend to view them as distractions from the primary task. At the tactical level especially, we see our task as the employment of the military element of power and do not regard the other elements of power as forces to be orchestrated in conjunction with the military to achieve results.

## OPERATIONAL LEVEL

The middle of the operational trilogy, the operational level, also contains all four elements of power. At this level, however, the weight of each is more nearly equal. The military man who fails to incorporate the other three elements of power into his planning at the operational level dramatically increases the chances of failure.

Because a sufficiently clear and precise definition of "operational level" has yet to be broadly established, many officers remain uncomfortable with the concept. On the whole, we will more or less readily admit that we do not fully understand it. Indeed, the operational level of war is not something that *can* be easily understood. It demands hard reflection and study. Warfare at the operational level, or at any level, has characteristics of both art and science. A science is more definite and can be learned more easily; the art form is indefinite, inexact, and poses a greater need for creativity and continuing study. In contrast to the tactical level, which has a much heavier science component, the operational level has a heavier art component, although the science component remains. It is the art component of the operational level which makes us uncomfortable. Part of the discomfort comes from the problems with terminology—at the tactical level there is a well-developed language that we are familiar with and can use freely and with effect, and even at the strategic level a vocabulary is available, if mostly developed by civilian theoreticians rather than military practitioners. Because there is no historically accepted vocabulary at the operational level, however, the tendency is to use terms from both the tactical and strategic lexicons, and this practice often leads to confusion.

Despite our discomfort, we do have a fairly firm understanding of the science component of the operational level. For example, the integration of air with ground operations at the theater level, the structure and functioning of intelligence nets, command and control structures—these are things we understand and which can be

taught. The art of the operational level is more elusive.

An understanding of the art component of the operational level must begin with the realization that the operational level, stripped of all its pretensions, is a matter of perspective. The operational level of war requires a theater perspective. Regardless of size, if military force is being used to achieve a strategic objective, then it is being employed at the operational level. In practical terms, it is the unified commands that are key. As these commands employ force to achieve strategic objectives, they operate by definition at the operational level. In the larger unified commands, such as the European or the Pacific Command, the theater commander may remain in his strategic role by delegating the strategic tasks to subordinate commands. Through the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (JSCP) each of the unified commands is assigned strategic objectives, a portion of the national military objectives. Again, as an impediment to the rational functioning of the system, the JSCP assigns primarily military tasks—there is no equivalent mechanism to promulgate tasks reflecting the other three elements of power.

In spite of the criticism often leveled at the JSCP, it is an efficient articulator of strategic tasks. In the traditional sense, the strategic guidance to a theater should identify the enemy, stipulate the goal or tasks to be accomplished, and allocate the forces and support resources available for planning. Additionally, strategic guidance must also impose restrictions on the conduct of military operations by defining the political, economic, psychological, and military bounds within which the command must operate. The JSCP performs all of these traditional guidance functions. As is true in any planning cycle, the guidance in the JSCP is developed through successive refinements in conjunction with the unified commands. As a result of this process, strategic tasks that cannot be accomplished by the unified commands with available resources will be avoided. For planning purposes, the forces assigned to unified commands are restricted by a dual allocation process. The JSCP

identifies the forces available for planning, but it is the Joint Operational Planning System (JOPS) which is the ultimate allocator of forces, since strategic mobility limitations impose the most fundamental of all constraints. The JOPS tells the commander when and where forces can be made available. The unified commander's concept will be modified through subsequent iterations as the JOPS plans are developed. The theater employment plan must, in the final analysis, be based on the JOPS-defined flow of forces. As Frederick the Great noted, the sign of wisdom in a military commander is that he will "undertake only what is possible." Commanders who base their plans on overly optimistic assumptions as to what forces will be available will not meet Frederick's definition of a wise commander.

### THEATER STRATEGY

Based on assigned objectives from the JSCP, which may be further clarified by the JCS either through the JOPS or "off-line," the unified commander must then develop a military strategy for the region—a task that is done in fact, if not in name. In Europe, the theater strategy is a coalition/combined strategy, the strategy of Flexible Response. The other unified commands also must have a theater strategy. For example, the Southern Command must have a theater strategy, and it is clear from articles published by the command that it does. The difficulty with the Southern Command's strategy, and with those of the other unified commands, is that they have not been reduced to writing, nor are they formally approved at the national level as a strategy. Because they are not written documents, they have a tendency to change with political administrations, and with commanders. The danger with an unwritten strategy is that it may ultimately degenerate into a strategy of expediency. The theater perspective, key to the operational level, can be lost over time.

If the operational level of war involves a theater perspective on the use of military force, then we would expect a theater to have defined objectives and a theater strategy

designed to accomplish those objectives. Though, strangely it would seem, we have no clear doctrinal definition of a theater, one seems easy enough to describe. The NATO area of operations, from Norway to Turkey and including the Atlantic Command, can be best described as a theater of war, and the new generation of field manuals does just that. What is missing from our terminology is the old term "theater of operations"—currently being referred to in some US Army documents as an area of operations.<sup>8</sup> A theater of operations can, and perhaps should, have its own strategy. It will, at a minimum, be assigned strategic objectives. To use the NATO example, MC 14/3 may be an appropriate strategy for Allied Forces, Central Region, but the strategy of Flexible Response, with its escalatory ladder from direct defense to strategic nuclear exchange, may not be the best strategy for Eastern Turkey, Northern Norway, or the Atlantic. A theater of operations, then, may have its own strategy to support both the strategy of the theater of war and the national military strategy. Korea, a theater of operations in the Pacific theater of war, does have its own strategy, that of deterrence through victory-denial based on the concept of forward defense. It supports but of course differs from the strategy of the region as a whole. The determination of a theater strategy is one of the most critical steps in the entire planning process. As Field Marshall Keitel pointed out at the Nuremberg trials, "A mistake in strategy can only be made good in the next war."<sup>9</sup> One hopes that no American general ever need make such a statement to his conquerors.

The difficulty, of course, is that the correct theater strategy is not self-evident. It can only be developed through a clear understanding of the national military objectives and the nature of the theater itself. This theater evaluation must examine the employment of all four elements of power from the theater perspective. From an analysis of the effectiveness of these factors, the center of gravity—the objective which, when gained, will lead to mission accomplishment—for the theater must be selected. The

identification of the enemy's center of gravity is at the heart of the operational level. Traditionally, the US Army has concentrated on the destruction of enemy forces as being the one sure event that would guarantee success; enemy forces often will be, in fact, the center of gravity. Often too, however, enemy forces will not be the correct center of gravity. The center of gravity at the theater level may be the will of the enemy to resist, his political alliance, or even a psychological goal (from the North Vietnamese perspective, war weariness was our center of gravity in the Vietnam War). The difficulties involved in selecting the correct center of gravity provide a clear example of the art component at the operational level.<sup>10</sup> In our current environment, statements that we must get "within the enemy's decision cycle," that our objective is the "mind of the enemy," that "destruction of his command and control are key," all are attempts to define the Soviet center of gravity at the operational level. Clausewitz was unkind enough to point out that there may be several centers of gravity.<sup>11</sup> The key to the operational level is to identify and destroy the enemy's center of gravity while protecting your own. If you orient on a false center of gravity, your strategy will be wrong by definition, and as Keitel pointed out, you'll probably have to wait for the next war to rectify your error.

Unfortunately, even choosing the correct center of gravity as an objective provides no guarantee of achieving it, and in that failure, too, are wars lost. In Vietnam, infiltration was identified as the operational center of gravity—the one event of such importance that if it could be controlled, the war would be won. In a broader strategic sense, we determined that the isolation of North Vietnam from its external suppliers and from its ability to support operations in the South was the objective. Having chosen both a strategic and an operational center of gravity, we then were unwilling to take the steps necessary to accomplish the tasks that the choices dictated. Being thus unwilling, we gradually and unwittingly gravitated to an easier but false center of gravity, the destruction of the enemy's forces and his will.

This focused US attention on what we understood best, tactical operations aimed at the destruction of enemy forces. In the process, of course, we failed at the strategic level to protect our own center of gravity—the political and psychological willingness to continue—and we lost the war. Events in El Salvador indicate that we may have learned our lesson: the 55-man training team may not be the most efficacious military response, but it does not directly threaten American will to the degree that US casualties would.

A theater strategy, then, employs all four elements of power to attack the enemy's center of gravity and protect one's own. The theater strategy is the be-all and end-all of war. It is inappropriate to complain of winning the war militarily and losing politically. You either achieve your objectives or you don't, and military forces are just one of the instruments to be used. It is possible to win all the battles and still lose the war. If the battles do not lead to the achievement of the strategic objective, then, successful or not, they are just so much wasted effort. The task of the operational-level planner, the operational-level commander, is to see that the operations and battles do lead to the accomplishment of the strategic objective. He must keep his perspective.

### THE CAMPAIGN PLAN

It is through the mechanism of the campaign plan that the operational-level commander ensures that events lead to achievement of the strategic goal. The key and overwhelming responsibility of the operational-level commander is one of focus. He must remain focused on the strategic objective and on the center of gravity. His responsibility is to ensure that his actions lead to the achievement of the necessary results. If he loses his focus, if he becomes actively involved in the tactical activities of his command to the extent that he loses his perspective, he may win the battles but fail to execute his mission. The identification of the enemy's center of gravity and the single-minded focus on the sequence of actions necessary to expose and destroy it are the essence of operational art. This was our great

failure in Vietnam. We became so enamored of tactical successes that we failed to recognize that the sum of these tactical successes would not yield the strategic objective we sought. If the key responsibility of the commander is focus, then his key decisions are who, when, and where to fight. It is theoretically possible to plan a losing battle in the expectation that this loss will directly contribute to the overall operational goal. This concept has much in common with economy-of-force operations.

While the idea of the campaign plan has been recently imbued with a high level of mysticism, it is in fact a reversion to the procedures of the past. During World War II campaign plans were routinely prepared to direct theater-level operations. The campaign plan remains part of our doctrine, and it is defined and explained in JCS Pub 2, to include a sample format. The format itself is simply an adaptation of the five-paragraph field order with which most US officers are familiar. An examination of campaign plans of the past demonstrates that certain essential elements must be present, not all of which are properly included in the five-paragraph field order. A complete campaign plan will identify the assumptions upon which the planning is based and will identify and isolate those strategic objectives that the plan is to accomplish. As in the field order, the mission will be clearly stated and a plan of maneuver generally will be included. The campaign will be phased and the plan itself will include the allocation of the available combat support, the identification and allocation of combat resources available, a detailing of logistical considerations and limitations, and a deception plan to help guarantee success. All of these elements are traditional ones visible in the campaign plans of the past. The theater campaign plan should not be voluminous. General MacArthur's plan for his theater of operations in the Pacific was only four pages long. While brevity and mission-type guidance are desired, however, the plan must be complete enough to convey clearly the commander's intent to his subordinates.

The overall objective of the campaign plan must be the accomplishment of the assigned strategic objectives. In our current



system the unified commander, i.e. the theater commander, obtains his strategic objectives from the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan, and based on these assigned strategic objectives, he will devise a theater strategy to achieve them. The campaign plan is the mechanism by which the theater commander tells his subordinate commands how he intends to accomplish the objectives. It is also the mechanism by which tasks are assigned, and it will make clear how each of these tasks contributes to the overall plan. At the theater level, the campaign plan will generally be a joint campaign plan, since in modern war a single-service force is usually insufficient to achieve a national strategic objective. The theater subordinate commands, normally the component commanders, will prepare supporting campaign plans to express in somewhat more detail how their forces will contribute to the achievement of the objectives in the theater campaign plan. In most theaters there will be an air-land campaign and a separate air campaign. Depending on the situation in the theater, there may or may not be a supporting naval campaign. While it is theoretically possible to have a unilateral land campaign, US forces, by doctrine and experience, normally will not be committed without air support. That a unilateral land campaign is possible has been amply demonstrated by forces of other nations. The North Vietnamese, for example, committed their forces in a pure land campaign.

One of the distinguishing features of a campaign plan is that because of the expected length of the campaign, it is generally phased. The first phase, the phase that details the strategic concentration of forces for the battles to follow, normally will be prepared in great detail, but subsequent phases will be less and less clearly defined as the number of unknowns increases. The final phase, however, the phase that details the military situation that must be achieved to obtain the final objective, should be well developed. This requirement to visualize how the conflict in the theater will end, what the final disposition of forces will be, is a reflection of the paramount responsibility of the campaign

planner—the requirement to insure that the battles achieve the assigned strategic objectives. If this step is not taken, or is taken incorrectly, disaster may follow. The campaign planner must keep his thoughts, and his forces, oriented on the final objective. The ability to phase a campaign plan is an example of the art component at the operational level. Normally, a campaign plan will change phases when the planned tempo or type of operations changes, when the operations planned call for a reallocation of resources, or when the logistical requirements change.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of logistics at the operational level. At this level, especially in modern wars, logistics often will be the key consideration of all plans. To a large degree, logistics defines operations at the operational level. A campaign plan that cannot be logistically supported is not a plan at all, but simply an expression of fanciful wishes. The campaign plan, and the phasing of that plan, must allow for logistical restrictions as they exist and provide the time and resources for the logistical structure to be emplaced.

While a focus on the strategic objective is a mandatory perspective for the campaign, care must also be taken in articulating the assumptions upon which the plan is based. As is true in any planning process, if the campaign plan is based on invalid assumptions, then the plan itself can have no validity. Because the assumptions upon which the campaign plan is based may change, because the conditions that led to the adoption of those assumptions may also change over time, and because the enemy's response may invalidate the original plan, the campaign plan must be prepared with branches and sequels, as discussed in FM 100-5.<sup>12</sup> As one experienced campaign planner, Napoleon, noted, "A plan of campaign should anticipate everything the enemy can do."<sup>13</sup> As assumptions become invalid, as enemy activity and the friction of war change the conditions upon which the original plan was based, the competent planner will have available hip-pocket variants to compensate for these changes.

Since the essence of operational art and the campaign plan is a matter of focus—demanding a theater perspective—then a corollary is the requirement that the elements of the plan directly contribute to the assigned objective. In current terminology this concept is expressed by such words as integration, coordination, harmonization, and synchronization, but all convey the same thought. All available forces must be orchestrated so that they directly contribute to achieving the objective. As will have become obvious, this emphasis on focus is really nothing more than stressing one of the principles of war—the principle of the objective.

### PRINCIPLES

Jomini observed that “success in war results from the application of sound principles.”<sup>14</sup> The problem, of course, is to know what those sound principles are and how to apply them. While none perhaps should be accepted as valid for all time and in all conditions, certain principles have stood the test of time and should not be knowingly violated. Our doctrinal acceptance of the principles of war has varied over time, but fortunately the current version of FM 100-5 again recognizes them. They are *principles* of war, not rules. As convincing testimony to their importance, we should note their origins in the distilled thoughts on the conduct of war by the Great Captains of military history. Jomini articulated the principle that a commander “should utilize strategic maneuver to bring the greatest mass of forces into a defined area in a coordinated effort upon a decisive point.”<sup>15</sup> General Glenn Otis’s statement that “the primary purpose of the operational level is to gain positional advantage over the enemy” is so closely related to both Jomini’s view and the principle of mass that a commander will ignore it only at his peril.<sup>16</sup> This concept has stood the test of time, as have others.

Knowing which principles are decisive at a particular time is part of the art of war. As discussed previously, the operational level of war consists of two component parts—the art and the science. Most of us are fairly comfortable with the science component, as

science can be more easily taught. Books can be written, doctrine developed, and techniques taught that enable us to master the science of the operational level, and that is where our service schools have placed their concentration. The art component causes us more intellectual difficulty. Trained in a tactical environment where the science of war is predominant, we become uncomfortable when facing the intangibles of the art component at the operational level. Art cannot be mastered through rote learning; it is available for study and reflection, but it is not subject to codification. Increasingly, the senior service schools are stressing the art component, and much of this study can only be accomplished through a study of history, by examining the campaigns of the past and grasping why they were successful or why they failed. As an anonymous writer noted, “Military history becomes the laboratory of the military mind. In its pages one will find suggestions which make for qualities of greatness or mediocrity in the military leader.”<sup>17</sup> The military professional will study these lessons. The Great Captains of the future will be those who can correctly apply these lessons to their existing circumstances.

The addition of the concept of an operational level has been a major development regarding our ability to conceptualize war. The perspectives that follow—the recognition of the objectives-strategy-concepts-resources sequence, the recognition that tactical activities have utility only as they contribute to the achievement of operational objectives, and the recognition that the four elements of power are present at all three levels—provide a significant reorientation of our view of war. With the acceptance of the operational level, the campaign plan, with its phased sequencing of battles to achieve a theater strategic objective, once again has clear utility. We have been slow to learn that the sum of tactical successes does not equal the satisfactory conclusion of a war and that in the absence of an operational-level focus, and a clearly defined war-termination goal, these tactical successes may contribute little. The campaign plan must orchestrate operations and battles, and the other elements of

power; it is through the campaign plan that a commander makes clear his intent from the opening stages to the successful conclusion of the conflict within his theater.

#### NOTES

1. FM 100-5 clearly considers AirLand Battle to be both a tactical- and an operational-level doctrine. Throughout the manual the doctrine is referred to as a "how to fight" doctrine. The premise of this article is that the claim for AirLand Battle to be an operational-level doctrine rests on a misinterpretation of the meaning of the operational level of war. Conversely, NATO's Follow-on-Forces Attack is an operational-level doctrine.
2. US Department of the Army, *Operations*, Field Manual 100-5 (Washington: GPO, August 1982), p. 2.
3. US Department of the Army, *Operations*, Field Manual 100-5 (Washington: GPO, May 1986), p. 10.
4. While not normally addressed in military terminology, each of the elements of power also has its strategic, operational, and tactical applications. If, within the military element of power, theater objectives are required to support the national strategy, then theater psychological (and political and economic) objectives also are required.
5. Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).

6. US Army War College, *Carl von Clausewitz: Two Letters on Strategy* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: USAWC, November 1984), p. 11.
7. Jay Luvaas, ed. and trans., "Frederick the Great: On the Art of War," reprinted in US Army War College, *Operational Level of War—Its Art* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: USAWC, 1985), p. 1-2.
8. The new (1986) version of FM 100-5 again makes reference to the term "theater of operations."
9. Brian I. Fugate, *Operation Barbarossa* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1984), p. 59.
10. The concept of the center of gravity exists at all three levels of war. At the strategic and operational levels the phrase itself is in common usage; at the tactical level, other phrases, such as key terrain, are used to express the concept.
11. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 619.
12. FM 100-5 (1986 edition), p. 30.
13. *Operational Level of War—Its Art*, p. 1-2.
14. US Military Academy, *Jomini, Clausewitz and Schlieffen* (West Point, N.Y.: USMA, 1954), p. 3.
15. In the context Jomini uses the phrase "strategic maneuver," it is clear that in present-day terminology he is referring to "operational maneuver."
16. Glenn K. Otis, "Perspectives of War," reprinted in US Army War College, *Planning-Volume III*, reference text (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: USAWC, 1984), p. 1-2.
17. US Military Academy, *Great Captains Before Napoleon* (West Point, N.Y.: USMA, 1955), p. 1.

